

James Randi Educational Foundation

an educational resource on the paranormal, pseudoscientific and the supernatural

SWIFT

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Online Newsletter of the JREF

Houdini and the Rabbi, The Patent Office Again, A Perpetual Motion/Emotion Car Breaks Down, More Magnetized Water, and Just Where Are the Penta People.....?

Reader Avital Pilpel, who provides us with so many good items, says that he "stumbled upon" this excerpt from a 1948 book, "The Unfailing Light" (1930), the autobiography of Rabbi Dr. Bernard Drachman. The Rabbi was a prominent figure in New York's Jewish community, and was closely connected with the Jewish Theological Seminary in NYC. He died in 1945, aged 84 years.

This is an interesting item, in that it provides us with the views of a well-educated and intelligent scholar, regarding a matter that has not been well handled by the media and the academic community in general, and about which I have expert knowledge. This is taken from chapter 42 of the book:

A few events of special significance stand out . . . One of these was the passing of Houdini, which occurred, if I recall correctly, in the month of October, 1927.

Note: no, it was in 1926....

It was my sad privilege to officiate at the funeral. His passing became the occasion for the widespread discussion of his personality and the extraordinary powers which he unquestionably possessed. His ability to free himself with astonishing swiftness from chains and padlocks and other means of restraint baffled all investigators.

What these powers were I, of course, know as little as anyone else, but they certainly were far exalted above the vulgar sleight of hand and tricks of ordinary so-called magicians. The Spiritualists claimed Houdini as one of their own and asserted that his escape from apparently insuperable means of confinement was due to his ability to dematerialize his body and thus pass through all physical restraints. Houdini himself denied that he was a Spiritualist medium — he was, indeed, an outspoken opponent of Spiritualism — and stated that his performances were strictly in accordance with natural law.

Now, Rabbi Drachman could have accepted this simple, correct, honest, direct, statement from Harry Houdini, but that would seem to require the Rabbi to admit that he did not understand how the apparent miracles of the magician had been accomplished. So, he ascribed special mystical powers to Houdini, forces that *no*



HARRY HOUDINI

Commentary Archi



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one, not even Houdini himself, could be expected to understand. And that scenario, to him as to so many others who have wondered about such matters, satisfied the problem. I must differ with his designation of sleight-of-hand as "vulgar." True, some of it is pretty bad, but even the fumlbers among us don't deserve that adjective....

This statement, of course, left the matter as much of a mystery as before. The Spiritualists refused to accept Houdini's denial that he was a medium. They insisted that he was. They even tried to drag me into the controversy as upholding their contention. In my funeral address, I had used the words, "Houdini possessed a wondrous power that he never understood and which he never revealed to anyone in life." These words are to be taken in their narrowest and most literal significance. All I meant was that Houdini possessed an extraordinary and mysterious power — and by that statement I am still willing to stand — the precise nature and quality of which was not clear even to him and that he had never taken anyone into his confidence nor revealed what his concept of his extraordinary gift was.

Well, I must tell you that Harry Houdini fully and completely understood his "powers," and they were the same as those possessed by magicians from the very first moment a rascally cave-man asked his friend to "Choose a rock, any rock." "Wondrous" only applies from the point of view of the average spectator. And, I must add, Houdini's methods and secrets were well-known — to the magicians — in his own lifetime. We "in the trade" are well aware of his methods, they are still in use today, and will be in active use when a future mountebank (just kidding!) asks a fair maiden, "Choose a planet, any planet."

But the Spiritualists seized upon these words to draw from them the utterly unjustified inference that I considered Houdini a Spiritualist medium and that his extraordinary powers were derived from a super-mundane, non-material source. Arthur Conan Doyle, the well-known author and Spiritualist leader, interprets them to that effect in his book, "The Edge of the Unknown." [1930] Of course, I meant nothing of the kind. My statement was simply a recognition of his undeniably extraordinary power, concerning the nature of which I admit that I am just as ignorant as everybody else, including A. C. Doyle, neither more nor less.

However, it is not because of this aspect of his personality that I esteemed and respected Houdini and cherish his memory. My respect and, I may say, my love went to him, as a true friend, as a generous and unselfish character, as a loyal and truly filial son, and as a Jew with a warm Jewish heart. As such and for these reasons his name will ever be held in honor as a worthy son of Israel.

Agreed. That last sentence is certainly true and sensible. Harry Houdini was a performer of *apparent* miracles, and not one who claimed his tricks were the real thing. He freely admitted, and in fact insisted, that there was nothing supernatural or paranormal about his abilities, and that in itself should invoke our serious respect. He was a man who because of his fame and his talents could have chosen to claim that he was specially gifted, but he did not; he had a deep sense of his ethnic background and tradition, his family responsibilities, and in particular his need for the acceptance of his beloved mother. Not only the Jews, but all of us can rejoice that he was among us.

Mr. Pilpel adds:

Obviously, there is nothing new under the sun. Spiritualists who claimed that Houdini was a medium who wouldn't admit it, moved on to blaming Randi for deliberately using his formidable "psychic powers" to thwart the efforts of would-be challengers to win the foundation's \$1,000,000 prize . . . One would have hoped that the "mediums" and other frauds would at least try to change their *modus operandi* once every fifty years or so. Ah, well....

Good old Bob Park of the APS (American Physical Society) once more made our week for us when he announced that the United States Patent Office was re-considering yet another patent — number 6,024,935, this time — granted to Blacklight Power, who will edify you with a pretty heavy description of what they call "The Grand Unified Theory of Classical Quantum Mechanics," if you give them a chance. They're at www.blacklightpower.com.

This patent was for "Lower-Energy Hydrogen Methods and Structures," which they describe as a process for getting hydrogen atoms into a "state below the ground state," whatever that means. Yes, I'm admitting my ignorance of the subject, but I defer happily to Bob. The patent involved something called "shrunk hydrogen atoms, called "hydrinos." Bob writes:

... the patent Director became concerned that this hydrino stuff required the orbital electron to behave "contrary to the known laws of physics and chemistry." The Hydride Compounds application was withdrawn for further review and the other patent applications were rejected. Since the one patent already issued involves the same violations of basic laws of physics, there is a cloud over its status as well. BLP filed suit in federal court arguing that it was too late for the Patent Office to change its mind. The court was not impressed, so BLP appealed the decision. In denying the appeal, the court said the Patent Office has a responsibility to take "extraordinary action" to withdraw a questionable patent.

Bravo! But why, hard on the heels of re-examining other questionable patents (see three weeks ago on this page), would the Patent Office have happened upon this particular one, when there are so many in this category? The secret can be inferred from Bob Park's weekly column, where we find: "Prompted by an outside inquiry (who would do such a thing?) . . ." That rascal!

The very fact that the Patent Office has paid heed to the complaints that Park, the JREF, and others have made, speaks well for rationality. Let's hope that we can look forward to many quack devices and systems being re-evaluated. Let's see a lot more of this "extraordinary action" from the Director. As for Blacklight Power, says Park, "Their long-awaited IPO may have to wait a little longer."

On a similar subject, reader David J. Schuller informs us of yet another entry in the "free energy/perpetual motion" racket, a car that was recently scheduled to do impressive test runs at a big race track, rented for that very purpose. Depend on it, this scheme, too, will make money while federal trade agencies and law enforcement continue to look the other way. Life savings will be lost, and those who can least afford to go under, will find themselves adrift while the promoters wear a path to their banks. David tells us...

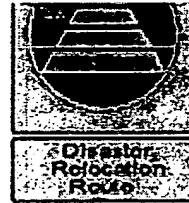
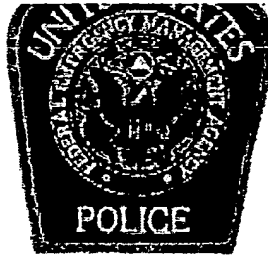
... of a demo of an electric car which is supposed to recharge itself (i.e. perpetual motion). The inventor is Carl Tilley of Lebanon, Tennessee, at www.greaterthings.com/News/Tilley/newstuff/index.html. The car ran a few laps, then conveniently broke down due to mechanical failure not associated with the power source. Be sure to note the exclamations about the resting voltage measured on the batteries (as opposed to measuring under load). Next time they say they'll bring two cars instead of one. I'm sure that will be Real Soon Now. Be sure to check out the other articles on the web site which provide the regular updates: www.greaterthings.com/News/. It appears to be vaguely Christian with a strong interest in conspiracy theories. I'll keep an eye on [a local newspaper that covered the event] for a few days to see if they do any followup or not. In fact, I think I'll send them a note specifically requesting followup.

Hold on a moment. Looking at the "Greater Things" page, I see that these



folks are not just, as David says, "vaguely Christian," at all. They're raving loonies! They're very big on quotations, particularly from the Bible, but not much on reality. The crazy old

"chemtrails/contrails" thing is discussed, along with the dreaded "666" subject; they show us that Bill Gates, Saddam Hussein, Henry Kissinger (their spelling), and even dinosaur Barney, are all represented by 666, and they ponder on whether Prince Charles is actually Satan. The "Bible Code" is a big theme here, too. But the very best and most potent revelation of all is found in their warning that the US FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency) has embarked on imposing "Marshall Law" (their spelling) on the citizens of the USA, a scheme which is cleverly concealed in their officers' shoulder-badge — seen here — the *very same symbol* that the Canadian Government uses to indicate disaster-escape routes! How could it be any clearer that evil forces are at work here? The text of this warning even tells us that one of the Canadian highway signs was discovered to be located "right IN FRONT of a church"!



Canadian road sign

As a famous poet might have said, "An equilateral triangle is an equilateral triangle is an equilateral triangle," or a famous quack psychiatrist could have declared, "Sometimes a triangle is just a triangle."

But let's get back to the "real" science here, while not dismissing the paranoia, of course. (If you did that, people would start talking about you....) The brains on the Tilley site tell us that the twelve 12-volt batteries (!) that run the car are "recharged by a proprietary internal process." Then they reveal the big secret of this process by saying, "The battery gets the motor going, and the motor then feeds energy back to the batteries." *This* is the method? The mind boggles....

As if to top off the account of this aborted demonstration of the car, we're informed that they didn't get the expected constant feedback from the race track, because the battery on their reporter's cell phone went dead. Seems appropriate.

And I'll put in here a simple question for David, who so kindly alerted us to this matter: Why do I receive so many of these items written all in lower case, without punctuation or spacing between sentences, and all in *one* monstrous paragraph? I have to pick through and revise the text, space it, and punctuate it, to make it readable and suitable for use. Are the shift key and space bar that hard to find on your keyboard, David? I'll send you a diagram....

I've been sent a correction of some exchanges I quoted here two weeks ago. I got the attributions and the division wrong. It's a change from this:

[To George] Sure you do. It works just as well as the magic fuel conditioner you sell. *Ad nauseam*, I note that this "demo" would win you a million if you could do it double blind. But you won't even try, because Randi won't accept such a challenge. The studies have been done and demonstrate the difference between magnetically treated and untreated water. Kronenberg published the before and after magnetic treatment pictures and you saw them. Cranfield University has similar before and after pictures on their web site from their studies and you saw them. Trinity College Dublin have before and after pictures from their study and you saw them.

To this:

[To John Bain from George] Sure you do. It works just as well as the magic fuel conditioner you sell. *Ad nauseam*, I note that this "demo" would win you a million if you could do it double blind. But you won't even try....

[From John Bain to George] Because Randi won't accept such a challenge. The studies have been done and demonstrate the difference between magnetically treated and untreated water. Kronenberg published the before and after magnetic treatment pictures and you saw them. Cranfield University has similar before and after pictures on their web site from their studies and you saw them. Trinity College Dublin have before and after pictures from their study and you saw them.

Okay. That did seem a bit strange when I first saw it. Removing the endless codes as I transfer text, I sometimes lose important factors. Sorry! And yes, we *will* accept such a test, Mr. Bain, just so long as "tap water" or similar water without any added metallic compounds, is used. In fact, I e-mailed Mr. Bain as follows:

"It is of course not impossible that magnetic treatment of *specially-selected* water samples might give the result you claim. The Trinity College account that you cite only specifies "mineral water" and "well water." Both these are very general terms, undefined, and totally unacceptable. Please do not now report that 'James Randi admits that treatment by static magnets alters water in such a manner that a suitably sensitive person can detect, by taste, the difference between treated and untreated water.' This is *not* what I'm saying."

And, Mr. Bain, whether or not we accept the Trinity College material, or the Kronenberg or the Cranfield accounts that you quote, has *nothing to do with your claim*. You have a specific claim. Let's get on with it.

Mr. Bain....?

Bernard Morey from Australia sent us this newspaper article on the same tired, silly old subject of weeping, bleeding religious figures:

Weeping Statue Draws Crowds

A fiberglass statue of the Virgin Mary bought in Thailand eight years ago has attracted hundreds of sick visitors to the suburban Perth home of Patty Powell. The statue has been claimed by many to be a miracle because it appears to drip a rose-scented oil-like substance from the eyes.

Ms. Powell said when the statue first cried on March 19 this year, she became overwhelmed with grief. "I cried the first time, it felt like my own mother was crying, it was a very humbling experience and really blew me away," she said. She said she was not sure whether it was a personal revelation she had witnessed until the statue "cried again" over the Easter period.

She said the statue, which she said she bought for about \$150 at a religious shop in Bangkok, has since been weeping continuously. "I knew in my heart then what was happening and thought that maybe this was supposed to be seen by more people than just me." Since then, hundreds of people have made the pilgrimage to Ms. Powell's Rockingham home where she has set up a shrine to the Our Lady of Lourdes church to see the statue on display and to touch some of the oil. "The people who come to see her (the statue) are so devout and so reverent, it feels as if my life is just beginning."

She said that she did not know whether the statue would continue to weep or whether she would move it from her home but wanted to take things on a "day-to-day basis at this stage." Ms. Powell said Catholic Archbishop Barry Hickey had seen the statue but had said that as yet, no official proceedings would be made to have its powers formally recognized by the church.

Oh, good. That's refreshing indeed. Hey, folks, grow up! Ask a few basic questions. Is there an adolescent in the house? Anyone else with something to prove? Does Ms. Powell herself have an axe to sharpen, here?



Before

After

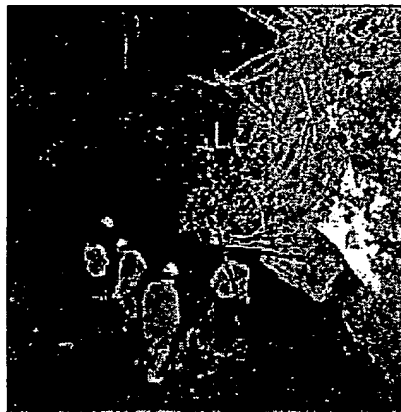
I performed an experiment. This statue, a plaster one that sells for \$1,000, can be vastly improved just by keeping the rascals from secretly squirting oil, perfume, shaving lotion, or cologne, on the lady. See the results!

Reader David Bellows writes us about his experience with one of the scams we've handled here. We're still waiting to hear from the Penta people, who we understand have been hiding in a cave in Colorado with Sylvia Browne:

I happen to work at a health food store in Atlanta, Georgia. One of our best-selling products is Penta water, in fact we bring in around 200 cases of the stuff every week. I work in the produce section so I do not have much contact with people looking at Penta water. However, since I've been there for over six years people do occasionally seek out my opinion.

Recently a man came up to me with three cases of Penta water in his cart (most people buy by the case it seems) and asked me what I thought of it. I told him that it appears to be the same filtered water ("reverse osmosis") we sell for \$.39 a gallon and that there have been no reliable studies conducted to indicate otherwise. He said that he'd been using the water for several months and that it seemed to help him but he couldn't be sure that it wasn't just all in his mind. His use of it is based on the claim that because it is supposedly absorbed better into your cells you'd have less "left-over" water that would be eliminated by urination. This is a concern for him as he is a long-haul truck driver and given that he drinks lots of water while driving he doesn't want to have to pull over for rest stops every fifteen minutes.

I told him that we, as humans and whatever before had been drinking regular old water for thousands, tens of thousands, and even hundreds of thousands of years and our bodies were probably pretty good at handling it by now whether or not it "clusters" like Penta claims. He laughed and said that I'm probably right and put back one of the cases. Small victory (he did still buy two cases) but the important thing is that



Skeptics searching for Sylvia Browne and the Penta executives.....

it had already occurred to him that the positive effects he'd witnessed might possibly not be real.

My comments perhaps provided some confirmation which made it easier for him to put back one of the cases. Of course causing the store to lose sales like this does eventually hurt me in the pocket book, but if people ask my opinion I give it.

(There is a new water being sold in our store called Vivo Water. It claims to "clump" in some beneficial manner. More than a few customers have noted the apparent contradiction in "water theory" between Vivo and Penta. When they ask my opinion all I can do is shrug.)

David, I sometimes think of how embarrassed I would be if I were caught buying Penta Water or any of the other quack material so widely sold now. Reminds me of the joke that illustrates how mores have changed in recent years:

A teenage boy steps up to the pharmacy counter and loudly declares, "I'll take a dozen of your best condoms!" As the clerk reaches for the merchandise, the kid leans forward and whispers softly to him, "And — a pack of Marlboros...."

Reader Brian S. Lewis chides me about writing: "I have great faith in the Sun showing up tomorrow morning because evidence — my experiences, some 27,073 of them to date — have established for me that it's quite probable that the event will occur." He says:

I don't disagree with your point, but there is one small thing that needs saying: there is no logically sound reason to base guesses about the future on events in the past. Perhaps the way that it works is that James Randi is born, and the Sun goes out on his 27,100th day. There is a philosophy thought-problem related to this in which people are having a raffle over the course of a week and are guessing which color god will make the sky. I think I read about it in Simon Blackburn's book, "Think."

Brian is missing the point here. What author Blackburn refers to are phenomena like flipping a "fair" coin. No "run" or pattern of "heads" (or "tails") can influence the next flip, but the rising of the Sun is something that depends upon huge physical systems already in action, which have been in place for a very long time, that have huge inertia, and that are therefore predictable and dependable. The coin-flipping is an essentially randomized act; the rising of the Sun is not. And remember that I carefully said "quite probable," not "certain," for everything just might vanish ten minutes from now. That's quite improbable, I must add....

Another writer, Sivar, scolded me for having an inaccurate number of Sun-risings in my experience-span. I answered that I was once lost underground in a cave for two weeks (not true, but the best I could come up with), and that I used 365.25 as the number of days in a year, rather than the 365.25625 he used. Okay, if I'm going for two points of decimal accuracy, I should have used 365.26.... Picky, picky, picky! Of course, I could get into the choice of a solar, sidereal, or anomalistic year — though surely not a lunar year.

But I won't.

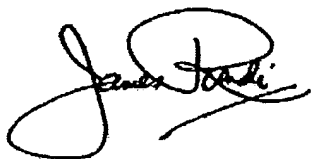
Reader Randall Boyce comments:

I am glad you pointed out in your "Survival Without Magic" article that the author wrote it 34 years ago. However, I was offended that you did

not mention the fact that the philosophy of Political Correctness has been scientifically proven by some of the great thinkers of our time like Jesse Jackson and Jane Fonda. Perhaps you need more Sensitivity training.

Perhaps.....

This is being posted while I'm still in Italy. Since I'll be getting back barely in time to prepare a new page change, the next one may be a bit short....



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